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SUBJECT: SERBIA - DUELING MUFTIS OVERSHADOW IFTAR

Summary

1. (SBU) In the midst of a bitter contest between Islamic leaders that reaches deep into the politics, economics, and financial aspirations of Serbia's Sandzak region (septel), the Ambassador went to Novi Pazar to host an Iftar and to deliver a message about reconciliation. Building on this theme, he encouraged Novi Pazar university students to assume leadership of the region's democratic and economic development. Caution in the face of heightened tensions and a spate of violence in the region led to cancellation of most of the Ambassador's visit schedule. End Summary.

Widening Split Leads to Near Cancellation

2. (SBU) A week of escalating tension and violent incidents in Serbia's majority-Muslim Sandzak region nearly quashed plans for the Ambassador's visit and annual Iftar dinner in Novi Pazar. To underscore the USG's undiminished support for multiculturalism, despite the Mufti wars and potential for continued related violence, the Ambassador did not cancel. He did, however, restrict his program to hosting the Ramadan iftar and delivering a speech at the local university, and carefully managed public and media exposure to avoid the appearance of taking sides in the split between rival Islamic factions.

Ambassador Stresses Students' Role in Democracy

3. (SBU) In a speech to 200 students at Novi Pazar University, the Ambassador highlighted the United States relationship with Serbia and the students' future role in this relationship as leaders of the country. He emphasized their responsibility to promoting democracy and economic development in the region. Muamer Zukorlic, President of the University and Mufti of the Islamic Community in Serbia introduced the Ambassador and concluded the event with his remarks highlighting the multi-ethnic, secular character of the University. Zukorlic stressed the University's private status and strong financial backing. Boasting the capability of the university's 4,000 students, Zukorlic identified the student body as the future intellectual elite who would drive economic development in Sandzak. In the question and answer period following the speeches, faculty and students asked for more exchange programs with American professors and students.

The Schism

4. (SBU) Zukorlic spoke of the split between the Novi Pazar and Belgrade Islamic communities, in a private conversation with the Ambassador, noting that tensions were running very high. He assured the Ambassador that he retained control of all the Islamic institutions of the Novi Pazar community but accused the police and intelligence services, supported by the Democratic Party of Serbia, of master-minding disturbances of the previous week. Zukorlic

expressed particular concern about the October 6 disturbance in Sjenica, complaining that the police who entered the mosquet demonstrated unprecedented lack of respect, trampling prayer rugs with their boots, and asked the Ambassador to send a message to the Belgrade that more widespread unrest could break out in Sandzak if such events continued. Embassy later learned that the Belgrade community was to host a public event in Novi Pazar on October 11 to celebrate the investiture of a new Reis (supreme leader), and planned to bus in supporters. The event happened without violence and only verbal confrontation between Zukorlic and Zilkic's supporters, largely thanks to a heavy police presence.

Iftar Dinner Unmarred by Tensions

15. (SBU) On October 9, the Ambassador hosted an Iftar dinner, October 8, to observe Ramadan, a traditional element in post's Muslim outreach activities. The Iftar dinner proceeded as planned and without disturbance. Religious leaders, local politicians, local journalists, and representatives of local non-governmental and international organizations, attended. Mayor Sulejman Ugljanin of the List for Sandzak coalition, who supports Zukorlic's rival, was conspicuous in his absence. After the dinner, some of the guests spoke to the Ambassador about the dire need for economic development in this poor region of the country. Press coverage of the event was neutral.

Comment

16. (SBU) The Iftar dinner was successful as a Muslim outreach event, and the Ambassador gained some insight into the origins and nature of the Mufti schism. The rift clearly is not about religion but more a political and economic grab for potential Islamic holdings -- and profits -- in the area. Sandzak remains a flashpoint in Serbia and is likely to continue to be manipulated by political factions

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for political and financial gain. End Comment.

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